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Training for Cross-Cultural Interactions with Children

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Running Heading: Cross-Cultural Communication Training

Training for Cross-Cultural Interactions with Children

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CST 431 – Intercultural Communication

Capstone Final Paper

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Abstract

In this paper, a training program for new volunteers at the Regence Boys and Girls Club organization is proposed. This training program will reduce uncertainty of volunteers and create a more culturally competent individual who is better prepared to work in an intercultural environment. It will emphasize three main objectives that should be accomplished including: motivation, knowledge, and skills changes. According to Ting-Toomey (2007), if an individual develops these three objectives, a successful training program will exist. Within these three objectives, specific skills are highlighted in the training programs which have been noted within previous research. Understanding nonverbal communication, identifying and utilizing backchannel cues, and gaining overall background knowledge on specific cultures are the main skills that will be taught in the new training program. This supplemental training session should benefit the organization by helping minimize conflict between people of different cultures, as well as by educating about cultural communication styles and techniques.

Training for Intercultural Interactions with Children

Introduction

As a volunteer for the Regence Boys and Girls Club, I had the opportunity to work with children from various cultures, different from my own, and participate in numerous activities that allowed me to get to know the children on an intimate level. The Boys and Girls Club provides a positive environment where children are able to find love and support from the adult staff and volunteers who work there. Their mission is to enable all young people, especially those who need them most, to reach their full potential as productive, caring, responsible citizens. They do this by providing a safe environment to learn and grow within ongoing relationships with caring, adult professionals, life-enhancing programs and character development experiences, and finally by providing hope and opportunity. Without the Boys and Girls Club, some children have no real place to call “home”. The Regence Boys and Girls Club, located in the New Columbia district in North Portland, hosts up to 300 kids each afternoon from about 2:00-7:00 pm. There are only about 10 full-time staff members who work at this location, so volunteers also play a huge role in interacting with the kids on a daily basis. Volunteers are always welcome and encouraged to come and work with the kids in the club doing various activities such as homework help, managing activities, coaching sports teams, etc.

Because volunteers are fully engaged with the kids, who come from low income families and are mostly black and Hispanic, I feel that a proper training program should be implemented into the “hiring” process in order for volunteers to gain knowledge and skill about how to interact with children from other cultures. It is very important that volunteers, such as me, who come from a different culture than most of the kids, learn how to communicate skillfully

with them in order to manage emotional frustrations and interactive struggles (Ting-Toomey, 50). This paper proposes a training program to implement in order to establish a fuller sense of comfort for volunteers than I experienced during my time at the Regence Boys and Girls Club. Implementing these suggestions may help the Boys and Girls Club volunteers become and feel more competent when communicating with children or adults from other cultures. They should be able to relate and interact in more appropriate and effective ways because of the knowledge they receive during the training program.

Background

The main problem that the Regence Boys and Girls Club holds is that the training or orientation program, as it was for me, was not sufficient enough to prepare a volunteer to work with children from different cultural backgrounds and cultures. Interacting and communicating with these vulnerable children are important skills that need to be developed in order to be a good role model and influence in the child's life. Because many of these kids come from broken families or unstable living environments, they often require more attention and support from the adult figures they meet at the Boys and Girls Club. Like me, volunteers who offer their time to spend at the club may not have previous experience working with people from other cultures. They may not have had previous cross-cultural relationships that would benefit their communication competence in this situation. I am one of the many people who has had little experience with intercultural communication, which is why I feel strongly that the Boys and Girls Club could supplement their orientation with a training program that includes gaining the appropriate communication skills needed to interact with these children.

As I have mentioned above, I feel that the training program would benefit from a more cross-cultural substance and valuable information for its volunteers in order for them to communicate effectively. The training program I received was approximately 15 minutes in length and the majority of the orientation was a tour of the building. When we toured through each room, the volunteers coordinator did give us a brief background on what goes on in each room and how it benefits the children; however the main focus of the orientation was to tell us how the club works as opposed to how to deal with the children. Though, we were able to ask questions at the end about anything we might need to know, there was not enough time to engage in conversation that would help me to better understand the types of children that attend the Boys and Girls club and what communication styles they use. The orientation provided before my volunteer work experience actually began did not fully prepare me to deal with the issues and conflicts that come up on a daily basis between both kids and staff members of different cultures.

This new implementation to the orientation program would first benefit the volunteers. They will receive knowledge – that will be discussed later in the proposal – that will not only benefit them while volunteering at the Regence Boys and Girls Club, but will also allow them to develop a broader set of communication skills to use elsewhere. Because of the lack of knowledge presented by the volunteers about how to handle cross-cultural relationships, a huge gap in the communication between the intercultural dyad needs to be filled. The communication gap provides confusion and frustration to both members of the pair that could easily be avoided due to education on how to avoid those types of situations by using the proper communication methods (Ting-Toomey, 50).

Although the focus of this added training program is to affect volunteers in a positive way and help them transition into managing cross-cultural interactions more smoothly, the children and staff are affected by it as well. The children are in need of positive figures in their life that they can rely on for advice and help in all aspects of their life. From my first couple of visits to the club, I have already noticed that these children depend on volunteers for support and love they do not receive at home. Some of the children mentioned that the Boys and Girls Club was their favorite place to go because all of the staff are so “cool” and “nice to us”. Because of these interactions I had, I feel that it is especially important to take the time to learn how our communication affects the children and what we can do to make for a better interaction. Children from different cultures offer a different way of communicating both verbally and nonverbally. If volunteers spend time learning these communication patterns and directing their communication methods toward these patterns the kids provide, then the kids will be greatly benefited because there will be less confusion and frustration within the interaction. There will be more of a mutual understanding about what is being communicated by each person.

One of the main goals of the Boys and Girls Club is to enable children a place of safety with good role models and influences that help provide support and love to those who need it. I want to make sure that this mission is accomplished to its full potential by providing these children with the most educated and knowledgeable staff and volunteers. Because of incomplete training currently provided for volunteers, the Boys and Girls Club may be falling short of their goals. As Elfenbien mentions in her article entitled, “Learning in emotion judgments: Training and the cross-cultural understanding of facial expressions”, focusing on all

types of communication especially nonverbal communication is key to understanding another person's culture and communication approach. All types of communication need to be learned in order to improve the overall communication process and to achieve the goal that the Boys and Girls Club presents of providing these excellent staff and volunteer members. After adding this new program to the already existing orientation that takes place, a stronger, more developed volunteer will be produced who can work effectively in cross cultural-relationships.

Proposed Approach and Work Plan

Importance of Intercultural Conflict Training

As identified in the Introduction and Background sections of this proposal, I will offer here an additional training program for the Regence Boys and Girls Club to enhance the performance of the volunteers and to help them feel more comfortable and competent when working with students and staff of different cultures. Over 18% of Americans speak a different language in their household, which proves true in this diverse Boys and Girls Club and is why a training program is so important (Osterling, 2004). According to Ting-Toomey (2007) intercultural conflict training is a competence-based training of individuals in order to manage emotional frustrations and interactive struggles constructively due to cultural group membership differences. Her training program is a primary reference in developing my own plan for this organization. Ting-Toomey has explored her definition of cross-cultural conflict training through a variety of communication theories that show a need for intercultural communication training in certain situations. In a situation where conflict may be present through confusion or differences in language or culture; intercultural training is encouraged

according to Ting-Toomey. Because of the large culture differences among volunteers, students, and staff within the Boys and Girls Club, many training procedures should take place to help blend the cultures together and create mutual understandings and culturally competent individuals.

Proposed Cross-Cultural Training Program

The new training program at the Regence Boys and Girls Club will incorporate many important intercultural communication aspects found through previous research studies. The most important skills for the volunteer to develop through the training are practicing and understanding nonverbal communication, using appropriate backchannel responses, and learning about the culture before being immersed fully into it. These skills as well as being an active listener, learning how to save face in an uncomfortable situation, and learning specific communication styles of the culture you are interacting with will benefit the volunteers and give them a broader tool kit to work from when confused or uncomfortable in a new situation.

Ting-Toomey proposes a model in her article entitled, “Intercultural Conflict Training: Theory-Practice Approaches and Research Challenges”, that reiterates the need for intercultural training. This theory helps sculpt how to properly train culturally competent individuals. The A.E.I.O.U. model is the key test to knowing whether the trainers have indeed mastered something concrete in their training workshop and that the trainees have actually got the concepts imprinted in their minds. With this model, Ting-Toomey believes that all conflict resolutions’ problems should adopt a cross-cultural perspective. She feels that all training programs should also reflect a keen cross-cultural sensibility. A.E.I.O.U. stands for “attack,

evade, inform, open, unite, and with an added “y” to symbolize yes” (Ting-Toomey, 2007).

Once the individual acquires all of these actions that allow them to accomplish the three objectives: knowledge objectives, skills objectives, and attitudes objectives, then the individual has passed the test and is indeed a culturally competent individual. This model, proved by Ting-Toomey, will be a key element in the new training program that should be implemented. These objectives will be the basis of the training program and will provide the framework for which the program is organized.

Because the Boys and Girls Club staff may be unaware of who is culturally competent or not based on a first impression of the new volunteer, the training program should be used with each volunteer who commits to the Boys and Girls Club. The new volunteer program will last for a full day (8 hours) and take place prior to the volunteer’s first experience in the club. Each volunteer who has been through the required background check will be required to attend this training. The training is based on the model developed by Coleman and Raider (2006), involving the A.E.I.O.U. model mentioned above. Coleman and Raider (2006) have shown that it is important to accomplish three objectives within an intercultural conflict training program. The three objectives are knowledge, skill, and attitude changes. Because this has seemed to be effective in previous research, I will relate these training activities to enhancing these three objectives of each volunteer.

The first set of activities will help to enhance the attitude objective, which is defined as a shift in the trainees’ attitude in ways that they will commit to the larger goal of increasing the use of collaborative conflict negotiation skills at all levels to create a more just society, and also to develop an appreciation of cultural difference as a source of richness rather than a liability

(Coleman and Raider, 2006). In order to improve these skills, the trainers will educate the volunteers on the students who attend the Boys and Girls Club on a daily basis. They will learn about the cultural differences and how important it is to interact with them. Trainers will use positive and inspiring ways to communicate these differences with the volunteers who should then be able to appreciate other cultures and have a desire to interact with them. This first part of the training should then motivate and inspire the trainee's to want learn the knowledge and skill required to implement these methods.

Next, the knowledge objective will come into play. Within this objective, the volunteers should be able to become more aware of key ways in which worldviews differ and how that can manifest into conflict (Coleman and Raider, 2006). This is where the trainer will elicit specific ways in which communication is different, specifically in the way nonverbal and backchannel cues are used by the cultures that attend the Boys and Girls Club. The trainers will have researched the differences beforehand and provide valuable information and applications for the volunteers to learn. Nonverbal communication and responding to backchannel cues have shown to be an important aspect involved in intercultural interactions.

Nonverbal communication is necessary in understanding and connecting with a person from a different culture. Hillary Elfenbein strives to improve intercultural training processes by understanding the effects of nonverbal behaviors in a cross cultural communication encounter in her article, "Learning in emotion judgments: Training and the cross-cultural understanding of facial expressions" (Elfenbein, 2006). In order to understand the full meaning of an individual's message, all aspects of the communication must be determined, including facial expressions and nonverbal cues that hint at what the person really means. The Elfenbein article presents a

training program that is studied as a way to improve the accuracy of judging facial expressions of emotion, a core competent of emotional intelligence (Elfenbein, 2006). Results of this study show that there was improvement in understanding facial expressions of someone from another culture after learning how to do so. These results suggest that training via feedback in nonverbal communication can improve emotion perception skill. Thus, the current study also provides suggestive evidence for cultural learning in emotion. The training program will offer numerous ways to allow volunteers to better understand the emotional intelligence of that person and themselves which will in turn help them to know how to with the child and know what type of communication strategy works best with them. They will be able to know how to react to certain cues that a child or a staff member might offer through nonverbal communication and know exactly how to respond in a particular situation that would be appropriate in their culture.

In any interaction backchannel communication is emitted by the listener while engaging in conversation. In her article in the *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, Li Han defines back channel communication as the short utterances such as um, hm, uh, huh, okay that occur in the backchannel by the non-primary speaker or listener when the front channel is occupied by the primary speaker (Han, 2006). Within this article, Han suggests that these backchannel cues are important in letting the listener know that they understand what the speaker is saying. Within this study, the main research question that is considered is: Did back channel responses facilitate or hinder information communication? (Han, 2006) A study was conducted with 40 dyads of couples who were paired cross-culturally. Their conversations were recorded and analyzed based on the backchannel communication present within the

dialogue. The main findings within the study prove that pairs in intra-cultural interactions where people were familiar with the other persons culture and way of communication used more backchannel communication which allowed for a more concise and productive conversation (Han, 2006). In the inter-cultural interactions where the individuals were unfamiliar with their partner's way of communication and culture the backchannel responses were not as present because the listener was not as comfortable in the situation. The results of this study supported the Communication Accommodation Theory, which states that interlocutors have a tendency to converge or diverge their own linguistic codes in conversation (Han, 2006). This is an important aspect of conversation that is ignored, especially in intercultural interactions. This skill should be implemented to the training program in an effort to improve intercultural relationships. If volunteers are able to give feedback within the conversation to let the kids know that they are listening, the kids will be more inclined to disclose more information which can benefit the relationship.

According to Ardish Rao in his article entitled, "Cross-Cultural Conflict and Expatriate Manager Exploratory Study", an individual should have some previous knowledge on the language and culture of who they will interact with before the actual interaction takes place. Some individuals, such as myself, go into uncomfortable situations with no previous knowledge of how people from other cultures act and the communication styles they use simply because they do not know to do so in the first place. Implementing this aspect into this section of the training program would be beneficial to the individual according to Rao because it would provide simple background knowledge one would need in order to act more appropriate in the situation.

There will be multiple different ways to distributing this information in the knowledge section of the training program: handouts, power point presentations, videos, etc... According to Coleman and Raider (2006), these tools should establish an abundance of knowledge in the volunteers that will lead them into actually practicing these learned skills in their everyday interactions.

The last objective that this new training plan will accomplish is directed towards the volunteer's skills. This will be the part of the training that the trainers spend the most time on because it is the most important in making sure intercultural conflict is eliminated. Coleman and Raider (2006) refer to the skills objective as a way to learn to listen when one's own identity group is under attack and be able to avoid ethnocentric or identify based-responses, and also create a collaborative climate through the use of informing, opening, and uniting behaviors (Coleman and Raider, 2006). This model is also referred to as A.E.I.O.U and will be implemented in to improving skills. The trainers will address each of these actions and how an interculturally competent individual should respond. They will learn how to avoid putting the other person under attack by not using certain phrases that may be harmful in conversation. They will learn not to evade in conversations when it is not appropriate by avoiding topics or ignoring a subject brought up. Informing, opening, and uniting behaviors will be learned by understanding how to ask open-ended and appropriate questions in a given situation. One should feel more comfortable and knowledgeable about what types of questions to ask after the training in an intercultural interaction and learn to be more open to unite two different cultures together.

Nonverbal skills need to be learned to improve the skills objective as well. As mentioned above, research has shown that training programs who have emphasized nonverbal behavior in cross-cultural interactions has benefitted the relationship. Exercises that help identify nonverbal behavior will be practiced during this part of the training to gain a complete tool kit of skills necessary for volunteering at the Boys and Girls Club. Activities such as identifying and practicing common facial expressions them will be implemented. These exercises will make the individual more competent overall and allow them to enhance their communication skills.

The last skill that will be practiced within this part of the training is reading and responding to backchannel communication cues. Similar to nonverbal cues, understanding backchannel communication cues have been shown to improve cross cultural interactions and eliminate conflict. Phrases such as um, eh, uh huh, and okay give the individual feedback when they are speaking in a conversation. Volunteers will interact during this portion of the training with a trainer and go over specific ways to give feedback to the communicator with these simple phrases. It has been proven to keep the conversation going longer and make both members feel more confident (Han, 2006).

After all of the objectives are learned and practiced through the training session, the trainers will facilitate interactions with the children observing how they interact based on what they just learned. Once the trainer determines that the trainee has met and achieved all the objectives when communicating with the child and feels that they understand all that has been taught within the training session, they are able to volunteer freely with the students. They should be able to be more comfortable in any intercultural situation that is presented to them

and know how to appropriately handle crisis and mediate conversations. After the training the volunteer should gain skills more knowledge and have a positive and encouraging attitude of the different cultures of the children that attend the club. Volunteers should also learn how to read nonverbal communication and feel more comfortable using backchannel responses in an interaction; interpersonal skills such as active listening and learning how to save face in a conversation will also be acquired through this program. This new training program will allow more cross-cultural competent volunteers that will benefit not only the children but the club as a whole.

Conclusion

This added training program for cross cultural interactions that occur at the Boys and Girls Club will add substantially to the solid organization it is. This training session will help volunteers become more culturally competent in intercultural conversations they likely will deal with on a day-to-day basis with kids from the wider range of cultures presented at the club. This training program should give volunteers the ability to communicate more skillfully and comfortably with people from cultures other than the volunteer's. The program not only will benefit the volunteers, but also the children who receive their attention. With a more cross-culturally skilled volunteer supporting and caring for them every day, they will be able to engage in an intelligent conversation and perhaps learn something valuable from the volunteer. This training session should benefit the organization by helping minimize conflict between people of different cultures, as well as by educating about cultural communication styles and technique.

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